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# News Release



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## **FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE APPROVES SOUTHERN SUBREGION HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN**

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – In what is being heralded as a major decision in comprehensive open space and habitat protection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) approved today a new plan which will preserve 32,818 acres of open space in southern Orange County.

The Service approved the Southern Subregion Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), a voluntary program that will establish a permanent habitat reserve and perpetual land management program for the protection of 32 different animal species and 10 vegetation communities. In the planning stages for more than a decade, this regional HCP encompasses large swaths of adjoining property owned by family-held Rancho Mission Viejo and the County of Orange.

“Our action today demonstrates the ability of public and private interests to come together to create responsible open space protection and make long-term land use decisions that will benefit endangered and sensitive species, and the people of Orange County today and in the future,” said Jim Bartel, Field Supervisor for the Service’s Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office. “We are greatly appreciative of the County of Orange, Santa Margarita Water District, and Tony Moiso and the Rancho Mission Viejo team for their long-standing commitment to develop this HCP. This truly has been a cooperative effort among all parties.”

Under the HCP, a total of 32,818 acres in southern Orange County will be designated as a habitat reserve to protect listed and unlisted animal species, including the coastal California gnatcatcher, arroyo toad and San Diego fairy shrimp, and vegetation communities of coastal sage scrub, grasslands and oak woodlands. Major portions of the San Juan Creek and San Mateo Creek watersheds are also protected under the HCP.

Rancho Mission Viejo will dedicate 16,536 acres to the future Habitat Reserve, in addition to existing Rancho Mission Viejo land conservancies; and the County will dedicate 11,950 acres of County parklands. In return, participating landowners can proceed with key development and operational activities, including improvements to the County’s 1,530-acre Prima Deshecha Landfill, necessary water and wastewater treatment services by Santa Margarita Water District, ongoing cattle ranching and farming operations by the Rancho Mission Viejo family, as well as the Ranch family’s 20- to 25-year

phased development planned for 25 percent of its remaining 23,000-acre Rancho Mission Viejo property.

“One of the most important components of the HCP is the formulation of a Habitat Reserve Management Program (HRMP) to ensure the long-term monitoring and management of the biological resources within the Reserve,” said Bartel. “In addition to County funding, in-lieu mitigation fees, and a contribution of \$3.7 million by Santa Margarita Water District, the HRMP will be funded through a benefit fee program paid by new development on Rancho Mission Viejo. The total interest and investment income generated by these different funding sources is projected to be about \$325.7 million over the next 75 years.”

The Service, County of Orange (under a new County Administrative Coordinator), a Science Advisory Panel and Rancho Mission Viejo will work in partnership to manage the new habitat reserve.

The Southern Subregion HCP is the second large scale plan approved by the Service in the County of Orange. The Coastal/Central HCP was approved in 1996 by the Board of Supervisors.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American Tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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